Consumerism

We all like Coca Cola, Starbucks, Cell Phones, I-pods and much more and actually believe we need these items to survive. That is something the entire world and its nations have in common. It is called Consumerism. This term is used in several different ways but the overall definition is that consumerism refers to a way of life in which individuals place a high value on material possessions, and in which people tend to consume more than they need. (Smith, 2003-2010)

Consumerism has an approach of influencing us by telling what we want without really knowing who we are through an attempt to use products and services to "cure" feelings or provide for needs that have little to do with material wants. “In many critical contexts the term is used to describe the tendency of people to identify strongly with products or services they consume, especially those with commercial brand names and obvious status-enhancing appeal, e.g. expensive automobile, rich jewelry. It is a pejorative term which most people deny, having some more specific excuse or rationalization for consumption other than the idea that they're "compelled to consume". (Word IQ, 2010) Consuming more than what an individual really needs is an ancient practice but in regarding of modern consumerism, it began with the beginning of mass production. In the past people produced many of their own goods, or lived and worked in close proximity to their producers, and production was primarily limited to basic needs, except in the case of goods aimed at the upper classes. (Smith, 2003-2010) Patterns in how people consumed changed with Industrial revolution. Through this revolution we shifted from a production oriented society to a consumption oriented society.

The important question to ask is whose issue is it? Consumerism is considered a global issue. The issue at hand is that it affects us all globally through our natural resources, forcing tweens to grow up quickly, consumer waste , Special Issues for Young Children, social and ecological consequences, substitute for happiness, form of mind control, and interferes with the workings of society . It estimated that it requires four to six hectares of land to maintain the consumption level of the average person from a high-consumption country by drawing down the natural resources. For example, the production, processing, and consumption, of commodities requires the extraction and use of natural resources (wood, ore, fossil fuels, and water); it requires the creation of factories and factory complexes whose operation creates toxic byproducts, while the use of commodities themselves (e.g. automobiles) creates pollutants and waste. (Shah, 2005) Marketers have discovered that there is much money in treating pre-teens like teenagers. They have taken parents out of the picture of these children’s life by treating them like mature, independent adults who in turns leaves them vulnerable to possibly corrupt and harmful messages about physique, sexuality, relationships and violence. (Network, 2010) In terms of waste, think of consumerism America and the aftermath. Garbage is piling up all around us and it has also become an issue.

The culture of consumerism adversely impacts our global practice. In the last century, our generation has been brought up to continuously demand more material objects. Many consumers wake up in the morning wanting a big McDonalds Deluxe Breakfast with a tall Starbucks coffee. On their commute to work or school, they may stop for a tank of gas and grab a quick snack for the road. On the road, consumers are bombarded with billboards for the latest products, and are encouraged to stop and purchase them. It seems that even if consumers don’t really need or even want something, they still feel obligated to buy it, so they can impress others. Advertisers love to use the psychology of competition to sell as many products as possible.

Many countries have abundant access to a wide range of products and services. These countries have well defined chains of supply and can readily acquire practically any good through imports. Other countries that are impoverished and not well structured are placed at a huge disadvantage. As a result, they may not have the resources to compete for the world’s diverse assortment of goods. The levels of sophistication can create issues regarding the balance of trade and fair compensation for products. This compromises many individuals freedom. Consumers are in the mindset that they must have these products to be happy. To satisfy the wants and needs of the affluent, many others can be negatively impacted. One has to wonder, is paying five dollars for a toy really a good bargain. We have to look at all the costs. Consumers need to be made aware of the whole truth behind the products they purchase. Almost all of the production of goods that has been outsourced to third world countries is driven by cheap labor availability. These men, women and even children are working night and day to provide American consumers with cheap and quality products. They work 14-hour days, have one 30-minute break and often don’t make more than a few dollars a day.

The effects of consumerism are expansive. As we have seen, these effects primarily affect laborers. Impacts are felt throughout our environment. We place heavy demands on limited resources to satisfy our insatiable desires. There are limited resources and once we damage our planet, there will be environmental consequences that will affect future generations. These demands weigh heavily on both renewable and non-renewable resources. To meet our desires, we continue to pollute our environment and deface our natural landscape. We must find ways to educate people and create fair trade practices if we are serious about mitigating the negative impacts we are now seeing.

Consumerism can also be seen as an attempt to use products and services to "cure" feelings or provide for needs that have little to do with material wants. Consumerism can be a salve or a distraction from loneliness, anxiety, lack of self-worth, lack of a healthy social life, sexual frustration, lack of civic life, and physical recreation or creative outlets. (Open Politics Foundation, 2003) this issue inhibits workings of society by replacing true life’s necessities, with a basic want for materialistic unquenchable pursuit for things and the money to buy them. Consumerism is a problem we all face and it has become an addiction overall. Society as a whole has the responsibility to raise their children as responsible citizens rather than as only addictive consumers. Our natural resources are being depleted; our world is being filled with garbage and our children are being affected greatly in their sense of whom they are and who they are going to become.

Consumerism is tremendously affected by social issues. Important resources and our environmental offers are slowly being destroyed through our social need for consumption. It's an "if we want it; we have to have it" mentality. The greed and desire for luxuries also opens the market up to all sorts of products at cheaper prices. Unfortunately this means less money in the pockets of those that are poor and are working tedious hours. The demand for inexpensive, convenient items keeps places like Wal-Mart booming and influences the world around us, but not necessarily in a positive way. Consumption is not being divided up evenly either. The wealthy get to invest in such luxuries and goods while the poor have trouble consuming even the bare necessities.

Ecological issues stem from our social consumption as well. Our dependence on oil is one topic that affects the world, but especially the United States. Oil is nonrenewable and when looking at statistics it is unbelievable how much of it we use when we are fully aware of the Earth’s lack of it. We also mistreat our land and animals through consumption of products that we then just pollute our planet with. Harming our environment causes a chain of horrible events that can lead to extinction of animal species or to destruction of entire landscapes. These devastating environmental social aspects are all response to our consumption habits.

Economic issues can also be affected by consumption and consumerism. With growing technological advances, we are able to pave the way for mass consumption which creates an even greater demand. The more machinery we are able to acquire through technology, the more we can expand products to regions all over the globe. This heightens the idea of cheap labor and importing workers so places like the U.S. can get their products with a low labor cost. Little do we realize that this in-fact messes up the deficit and leads to cutbacks and layoffs which in turn only harm our economy.

This harm is all stemming from our demand for products and outstanding rate of consumption.

With the rise in consumerism, comes the rise of visionary capitalists. A visionary capitalist can be described as individuals who adhere to personal wealth. They bring in income through investing, inventing, and inspiring other citizens to join into their own personal wealth. There are some popular examples such as Ron Conway and David Hornik who made their living through investing into companies such as Google, PayPal, and AskJeeves. They utilized popular technology and used its rising income to benefit their own individual cause. With the money that visionary capitalists acquire through working for and investing into, they are able to sustain their own income by creating their own businesses, companies, and capitalist firms. Visionary capitalists can sometimes create a bad image for themselves. Some take advantage of other large corporations and companies by bribing and stealing information, income, or property in order to get recognition, money, or just land. In the end, it really depends on what the visionary capitalist has in mind for the future. Some become very popular and use their success for good as well as personal gain, while others just focus on the pocket book.

When it comes to economic opportunity and politics, the issue of who is at the receiving end comes to play. When we as Americans start expanding our nation’s companies, products, and services we tend to expect the service and receive the revenue. We as Americans also tend to give ourselves our own rights to achieve our own success. If we travel outside of our own country, we still believe that building an empire on foreign land will always be a success, and although many times this can be true, it can also lead to financial and political strain. For example, when American lumber companies are in search for more material, they look to countries located in Central and South America. They give these companies a simple contract and friendly promises, then later disregard these false promises and ignore the need of the country and environment itself. They strip the resources without any thought as to how it is affecting the area.

In times of dictatorship the appearance of consumerism is scarcely seen. Most of the countries goods and products go to the government and prospect of industrial wealth. Consumerism was restricted to either the very wealthy or royalty. With so many in the lower economic status of the country, many were not allowed the luxury of consumerism. For example, under Stalin and a communistic society most of the wealth went to the war industry. Many companies stopped the production of their main products to supply war machines and ammunition to the Russian army. Also, most of the people in that time were under sustainable living, so what they produced were to keep them from falling deeper into poverty and starvation.

America is the leading country in consumerism. Therefore, due to the fact that America is also the wealthiest country in the world it is not hard to believe that we influence all other developed and developing countries. The idea of acquiring more of what we want more than more of what we need is a contagious prospect. This idea is spreading widely to other countries, and is growing continuously. America has spread its major corporations to a worldwide level. Companies such as McDonalds have grown into major worldwide corporations that are not only providing more job opportunities to the public, but at the same time spreading the “consumerism lifestyle” to its citizens.

Race, class and gender each affect consumerism. The desire for goods affects all races, classes and gender in different ways. The rise of materialism, especially technology has had a profound impact on consumerism. The upper class tastes and lifestyles trickle down to other social classes. Poor and middle classes purchase items to emulate wealthy society and advertising is designed to create the trends. Consumerism is driven by huge sums of money spent on advertising. This rise of materialism causes our culture to shift away from values of community to values of worldly possessions, replacing a normal common sense desire for necessities. Consumers are bombarded by advertisements everywhere. Consumers are routinely confronted with the new choices and a whole new generation of new products.

Poor and minority consumers are alienated from the ability to access goods. An example is having a grocery store in the area where you live. Most of us take this for granted, yet many poor areas including inner cities do not have access to a local grocery store. Many people are disenfranchised because of this. Many people cannot travel out of the area to other stores because of lack of transportation- a car, money for public transportation and difficulty in transporting groceries by bus or metro. Their shopping consists of fast food restaurants and convenience stores which are more expensive and also unhealthier than regular grocery stores. Our own city of San Antonio does not have a downtown grocery store that would definitely benefit senior citizens living in low income housing apartments. A chain grocery store would keep goods and prices more competitive for consumers.

Consumerism affects class, but lines of class are blurred, because credit has made luxuries available to people who may not be able to afford them in the first place. Technology has bombarded us with I-pods, I-pads, I-phones and everything in between. Luxury is available everywhere whether people can afford it or not. Each class is looking to improve socially while the rich are becoming ever more isolated from the middle class. Professor Conley, a New York University sociologist stated that

“Class now is really like three-card monte. The moment the lower-status aspirant thinks he has located the nut under the shell, it has actually shifted, and he is too late.”

(Steinhauer, 2005)

Gender is a driving force in consumerism. According to the latest Time magazine (Nov. 22, 2010) companies are radically changing the way they market to different demographics. Women now control 51% of the private wealth in the United States and 9 out of 10 occupations that will dominate in the next eight years are held by women. Women are making more of the household expense decisions than ever, so companies are going full force to attract female customers. Time magazine refers to this as the “Sheconomy” Around the world, women are becoming the new economy, shifting the power that has until now been held by men. Consumerism is felt by each race, class and gender.

The rise in materialism with disregard to the consequences is unhealthy for society and will have drastic environmental consequences. The rise of materialism causes our culture to shift away from values of community to values of worldly possessions, replacing the desire for necessities not just things.

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